

The Secret to a Successful Marriage? Humility May Be the Answer Says USU Researcher | CEHS

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Is humility more important to marital bliss than communication? For decades, success in marriage has been believed by most family science researchers to be the result of outward skills, such as communication or conflict resolution. These abilities are certainly important; but what if one's character naturally leads to these skills—and is consequently a stronger predictor of success?

A new study from Utah State University's Dr. David Schramm and his fellow researchers from the University of Alberta, Bastyr University, and the University of Arkansas found that humility, or rather the perception of humility in your spouse, can contribute to a happy marriage.

Dr. Schramm, who is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist in the Department of Family, Consumer, and Human Development at USU, helped develop the survey that was given to people in Arkansas, Utah, and Vermont as part of the "Qualities of Character and Marital Well-Being" study.

Schramm's data came from random phone interviews with more than 1,500 individuals who were not married to each other. The next step of the research, currently underway, is gathering more data on virtues and character strengths and comparing answers from both members of the couples they survey.

As the data from this phase were analyzed, three characteristics immediately stood out—humility, compassion, and positivity. "It was quite a surprise to find that all three of these qualities effectively predicted marital happiness" says Wally Goddard, the team leader for this research project. "Of course there is nothing wrong with good communication. But using the right words doesn't build a relationship when there is malice in our hearts. Good communication happens very naturally when our hearts are filled with humility, compassion, and positivity."

Dr. Goddard further explained that one way researchers defined humility was as a willingness to admit when we have made mistakes or are wrong. Compassion was measured as a willingness to help people when they are suffering. Positivity was defined as someone who expects the best or is optimistic.

To determine the quality of humility, researchers asked the spouse about the other's traits. Is he open-minded, respectful, modest? Is she able to put herself in another's shoes? Is he aware of personal limits and willing to put off his own needs? Does she recognize her spouse's desires, goals, and challenges?

Married people, particularly women, who viewed their partner as humble and compassionate reported more marital satisfaction than those who did not.

From a family science perspective, this approach is a novelty. The research, published in the journal *Family Relations*, shows that humility actually buffers marital stress and opens the door to connection and solutions. "All of us are born with a craving for connection," said Dr. Schramm, "and these three virtues (compassion, humility, and positivity) are seeds that can initiate these changes from the inside out."

Interestingly, even financial status or previous matrimonial experience weren't predictors of marital happiness. The lesson may be that people, perhaps women in particular, need to search for partners who are humble—but the message is also that it helps to change our own perspective if we want to be happier in our marriage.

One of Schramm's favorite phrases is "people are more important than problems." It's important to focus on the whole person and see things from their perspective, not dwell on small problems or disagreements. Schramm says that often our compassion is a matter of getting the bigger picture or the whole story. When we tune in to another's reality and better understand their needs, objectives, and challenges, we expose ourselves to our partner's vulnerability and need.

"Think of it as similar to when we're irritated by another driver in traffic," said Schramm's fellow researcher Adam Galovan of the University of Alberta. "I'm pretty sure the other driver is not thinking about impeding you."

Can these qualities be learned? "Responding to another's need, or even seeing it, stirs our desire to be more humble and kind—just what Tim McGraw suggests," Schramm says with a grin.

When we perform a small act of kindness or show awareness of the other person's need, it can be a catalyst to create a feeling of humility and compassion in another person. These can be "moving moments"—moving beyond relationship skills to be open to other's experiences. When we are open, we can absorb the best qualities of our loved ones or our partner.

With this exciting new vein of research, Dr. Schramm is helping USU to fulfill its mission to serve the community and the state of Utah. Schramm teaches classes in the community on marriage and parenting and is researching how personal character applies to healthy relationships. He is currently exploring predictors of healthy relationships and how to improve relationship quality.